Lessons learned from the first stage of East West Rail

Capturing key insights from the planning, construction and engagement stages of Connection Stage 1 of the East West Rail scheme.

Commissioned by East West Main Line Partnership and England's Economic Heartland.

Introduction

In celebration of the East West Main Line Partnership (EWMLP)'s 30th anniversary and the expected start of services between Oxford and Milton Keynes, the EWMLP and England's Economic Heartland jointly commissioned a lessons learned project focusing on the planning, construction and engagement stages of Connection Stage 1 (CS1) of the East West Rail (EWR) scheme from a local authority perspective.

This report draws on independent qualitative interviews undertaken with representatives from each of the local authorities along this line of route, as well as members of the original East West Rail Consortium (the Consortium), the East West Rail Alliance (EWR Alliance) and East West Railway Company (EWR Co). We are grateful to those who took the time to share their reflections and lessons with the interview team.

The interviews in summer 2025 were undertaken by an independent consultancy, Co.Cre8. Through an approach focused on enabling open and transparent responses, the team gathered key learning across three main stages of the EWR scheme, with a specific focus on Oxford-Milton Keynes (also known as Connection Stage 1 – CS1): securing the vision, delivering the railway, and transitioning to operation.

From the interviews, 16 lessons have been identified across six key learning themes:

- Working together to mitigate construction impact
- Role of local authorities
- Power of the region speaking with one voice
- Ensuring continued focus on places
- Communications
- Building collaboration, capability and capacity

By putting the local authority experience at the heart of this work, we have sought to highlight the wider impacts and opportunity that major strategic infrastructure schemes present. This is a lens that other investigations into EWR have not fully explored and is not widely considered within the major infrastructure projects discourse.

It is hoped that in doing so, the findings can support better delivery of future infrastructure projects, including the ongoing development and delivery of CS2 and CS3.

History of the East West Rail Scheme

This history has been compiled using factual sources alongside the reflections of interviewees.

Securing the Vision

East West Rail (EWR) is a locally-derived, bottom-up scheme. The EWR 'story' begins in 1995, with the establishment of the East West Rail Consortium (the Consortium), which is the predecessor to today's East West Main Line Partnership. Over the past 30 years, local authorities have come together with a shared ambition for a strategic railway connecting East Anglia with central, southern and western England and into southern Wales. The Consortium envisioned this main line in three geographical sections:

- The Western Section connecting Bedford with Oxford (and on to the Great Western Main Line), including the Aylesbury Link. The upgrades and new infrastructure required aligns with much of the geography for the East West Railway Company's Connection Stage 1 (passenger services between Oxford and Milton Keynes), with the exception of the 'descoped' Aylesbury Link, while the link to Bedford was deferred by the East West Railway Company to Connection Stage 2 (passenger services between Oxford and Bedford).
- The Central Section connecting Bedford to Cambridge. This geography aligns with where improvements and new infrastructure is required for Connection Stage 3 (passenger services between Oxford and Cambridge).
- The Eastern Section connecting Cambridge into East Anglia, and specifically Norwich and Ipswich. Whilst this is a key priority of the East West Main Line Partnership, it does not form part of the Oxford-Cambridge East West Rail scheme committed to by Government.

For ease, this report will refer to EWR as the infrastructure scheme to deliver rail services between Oxford and Cambridge (i.e. Connection Stages 1 through to 3). Unless otherwise specified, the findings and lessons around construction and delivery are predominantly focused on the construction works undertaken by or for the East West Rail Alliance (EWR Alliance) between Bicester and Bletchley (given that the link between Oxford and Bicester had been completed some years earlier by Chiltern Railways).

Interviewees were clear that from the outset that relationships have been the foundation of EWR's progress. The Consortium provided a focal point to engage with the local authorities and to establish the core purpose of EWR. This allowed them to speak with one voice across local and regional areas, when engaging with Department for Transport (DfT), Treasury and other areas of national government. Momentum swelled from a small group of highly driven individuals with purpose, gravitas and knowledge.

In 2007 Milton Keynes Council committed to undertake a feasibility study of the EWR scheme – bringing together a series of consultancy led studies and forming a project board of four local authorities. The team acted as a crucial conduit between local authorities and central government, providing and promoting a clear message around the desired outcomes for the EWR project. This also served to remind government of the local authority perspective: that EWR is primarily about unlocking local growth with new housing, jobs and connectivity to meet local and regional needs. Interviewees said this work and the relationships built were critical to transition the EWR project from a locally-derived scheme into viable national policy as the years went on.

Interest in the EWR project steadily grew across government departments, and advocates were found within the civil service to carry the scheme forward with central government support and funding. For example, in 2008, £2 million of funding was secured from a Department for Communities and Local Government growth fund – reflecting the primary driver of EWR as a locally-derived project to create socio-economic benefit to the local areas involved.

In the same year, a service pattern for strategic, freight and local rail between Oxford and Bedford was signed off by the DfT and embedded into Network Rail's planning input for future High Level Output Specification (HLOS) rounds as an aspiration. The HLOS sets out what the Secretary of State for Transport wants the railway to achieve during specified control periods. This inclusion recognised that whilst the scheme is locally driven, EWR needed to fit within the wider national rail network.

Around this time, Chiltern Railways were also planning major capital investments to create a new direct rail link between Oxford and London. This project was known as Evergreen 3 and was launched 2010. This would include an upgraded line between Oxford and Bicester, as well as a new Oxford Parkway station and the relocation of the old Bicester Town station which was renamed Bicester Village. The first passenger services ran on this line in 2016.

In November 2011, the Consortium published a prospectus, drawing on rigorous, independent economic analysis of the project, setting out the socio-economic benefits along the EWR corridor. This captured the common vision and benefits they were jointly seeking to achieve, giving local authorities a single, sharp message that resonated nationally. This message was reinforced by a communication approach that emphasised meeting people and keeping the project visible – whether in Westminster and at key events, or through engaging with local radio and community meetings.

The reframing of EWR as providing Oxford to Cambridge connectivity emphasised its role in unlocking jobs, housing and economic growth along the corridor. It challenged early perceptions of EWR as a 'small branch line', making clear it is more than a 'local rail link'. Its positioning alongside challenges such as housing shortages in one of the most expensive regions of the country, presented EWR as a place-based economic project. The vision and prospectus were instrumental in gaining support for the project within DfT, Treasury and No 10.

An All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) was formed, which helped validate the scheme within central government, showing cross-party recognition at a time when there was a coalition government, and building on a growing momentum behind the project. Across all levels of government, relationships were being formed which gave the project credibility. This was supported by imaginative public profile raising to keep the project visible.

In the same year, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne signalled he was minded to provide £270m for EWR in the upcoming HLOS as part of the National Infrastructure Plan, **if** the business case stacked up and there was a suitable local contribution. This led to the development of a Work in Kind (WiK) approach – where local authorities could contribute officer time, consultancy resource, land and place-based commitments rather than an upfront monetary figure of £45 million. At this stage, interviewees said the governance of the scheme was strongly underpinned by local

voice, shared ownership and a clear link between the expected benefits and the powers held by consenting authorities.

In 2012, EWR was formally included within Network Rail's HLOS for Control Period 5. This secured the scheme as part of the national rail investment portfolio – moving the project from something aspirational to being part of the "official" national plan. Following its inclusion in the HLOS, Network Rail took over project delivery. Local authorities continued to be represented through an EWR Delivery Board, with the Consortium team continuing to convene and act as a single voice across local authorities.

In 2015, the East West Rail Alliance (EWR Alliance) was formed by Network Rail to act as the delivery partner for design and construction of the remainder of what was known as the 'Western Section' between Bicester and Bedford, and the link from Milton Keynes to Aylesbury. The EWR Alliance was consisted of Network Rail, Atkins, Laing O'Rourke and VolkerRail.

In 2016, the government announced £110 million of funding for an east-west rail link between Oxford and Cambridge, tying the decision to the National Infrastructure Commission's interim recommendations on the Oxford-Cambridge Arc. At a time when cost pressures and delivery challenges were emerging across Network Rail's capital portfolio, the then Secretary of State for Transport Chris Grayling identified EWR as a promising infrastructure project to explore alternative approaches to infrastructure development, drawing on the strong local backing and regional growth potential. This led to the set-up of East West Railway Company (EWRCo) as an arm's length body in 2017.

In July 2018, Network Rail applied to the Secretary of State for a Transport and Works Act Order (TWAO) for upgrades of the line between Bicester and Bedford, and Aylesbury and Milton Keynes. This was approved in 2020.

Delivering the Railway

As the EWR scheme moved into delivery, interviewees described how the nature of the relationships between organisations shifted. The demands on local authorities increased, with the discharge of planning conditions and management of highways becoming critical pressure points. With the creation of the EWR Alliance and contracts being let, it became more difficult for local authorities to introduce new locally beneficial ideas, which were deemed too costly and slow to implement. Changes to design needed to be made on the ground to react to emerging local conditions with limited input from local authorities. Partially these changes were needed as a result of design being undertaken remotely during the pandemic based off LIDAR surveys rather than on the ground observation and detailed topographical surveys. These might have been avoided had local insight and knowledge, e.g. of ground conditions, been incorporated at an earlier stage.

However, the continuity of officers across the Oxford-Bicester works and into the EWR Alliance meant that already established trust was carried forward to the next stage. The relationships with local authorities allowed for early involvement in determining what would work on the ground, softening the community impact when construction began. Effective traffic management and clear communication were rooted in trust-driven, mutual relationships.

During the delivery phase, each of the local authorities had designated single points of contact (SPOCs) and various working groups which brought them together. This approach was widely praised and recognised by several interviewees as streamlining

communication, providing continuity and building resilient relationships between the local authority, EWRCo and the EWR Alliance. It proved highly effective in unifying councils and providing a clear channel into DfT and Network Rail.

The delivery phase showed both the strength and fragility of communications on the ground. The Planning Ahead Working Group (PAWG) and 4-week look-ahead meetings provided a joined-up forum for identifying upcoming works and their impacts. These sessions significantly reduced complaints, ensured "no surprises" for residents, and built confidence that issues would be managed proactively. When they were well funded and consistently chaired, communication worked. However, when the PAWG lapsed, issues began to arise.

In terms of the funding landscape, EWR continued to be announced by successive governments in 2021, 2022 and 2023. Alongside the increased funding announcement in January 2021, government set the expectation of the first passenger services between Oxford and Bletchley/Milton Keynes to run in 2025. However, uncertainty around longer-term plans for the Aylesbury Link have persisted since the Spending Review 2021, with decisions taken to descope it from the current EWR scheme.

The inclusion of the Aylesbury Link within the Transport and Works Act Order had been central to securing what was then Buckinghamshire County Council's early support (Buckinghamshire Council was created in 2020 from the county council and four districts). Major housing development has taken place with the fair expectation that it would be built. While the campaign for the link continues, its omission from the core East West Rail scheme is considered a missed opportunity for both the scheme and the wider economy.

Roads were (and remain) a particularly sensitive issue. The issue of cumulative impact was also significant – for example, in conjunction with HS2's construction. According to interviewees, some of the local roads utilised were not designed or built for hundreds of HGV movements, resulting in issues such as potholes, surface cracking and accelerated wear. In some areas, minor diversions resulted in significant detours, as well as local inconvenience, leading to complaints stemming from a lack of clear, upfront communication about traffic management plans. There was a lack of clear routing agreements for construction traffic leaving sites, leading to HGVs passing through villages on unsuitable minor roads and causing damage, which was not accounted for.

Without proper pre-assessment and maintenance, the cost of repairing the damage fell back to the local authority. Contributions to local maintenance were often inadequate to the level of damage. Agreeing strategic roads to be improved prior to construction and having a forward plan of potholes to repair was found to be more successful.

Planning conditions, such as those covering road surveys and agreed repairs, became critical tools to protect local communities. Interviewees said that where councils had clearly articulated these and had dedicated officers to engage effectively, they had greater leverage with the EWR Alliance to ensure disruption was minimised and planning conditions were adhered to. Dedicated officers with a commercial focus enabled some councils to negotiate advance funding, enforce planning conditions and ensure that roads were cleaned, repaired, and, where necessary, rebuilt.

The EWR Alliance developed a monitoring system alongside a commitment to repair and improve roads quickly, which was reinforced by a balanced scorecard. This approach

weighed up short-term disturbances against longer-term outcomes – through providing fair treatment to communities on reactive repairs, it was found that disruptive closures were more easily accepted. In addition, feedback signs were included on roadworks and HGVs so that the responsible contractor could be identified more easily and a faster response to any problems was enabled. Residents were also given a visible Single Point of Contact to channel their complaints. This was a step-change from similar major projects in the area at the time.

In addition, interviewees said the EWR Alliance worked with the parish councils, recognising them as trusted intermediaries and reinforcing trust through locally tailored methods. These included parish councils distributing leaflets, using Facebook, positing notices and sharing positive stories, such as archaeological finds.

Despite the tensions, there was, according to the people we spoke to, a spirit of joint resolution between local authorities and the EWR Alliance. Collaborative working between delivery teams and local authorities led to constructive engagement, with considerable effort invested in stakeholder communications and development of pragmatic solutions. Initiatives such as PAWG played a key role in anticipating problems, coordinating responses and maintaining trust while keeping the project moving at pace. The forward plan of all major programmes of work in the area held by joint forums helped with giving clear messages to local communities.

Transitioning to Operations

Construction was completed on CS1 in 2024, and the first successful trial train between Oxford and Milton Keynes was operated in October 2024. Unfortunately, the planned commencement of regular passenger services has been delayed until 2026, which has attracted criticism of the project at the national level. This has also resulted in some confusion locally, as the line is now open to freight services.

The handover from construction to operations has highlighted gaps in the governance processes. As the EWR Alliance budgets tightened and demobilisation approached, interviewees said the level of collaboration became reduced, with interactions becoming more formal and based on stricter definitions of planning conditions.

For local authorities, the primary handover process was as the Local Highway Authority. Each local authority negotiated their planning conditions separately, resulting in some authorities successfully negotiating beneficial supplemental provisions. Without clear specifications, escalation routes or agreed change management processes, this risked leaving local priorities unmet at handover.

Some councils created their own snagging lists to track non-conformances and whilst Network Rail introduced a tracking system, there was limited ability for the local authorities to access this information or influence resolution.

For a period of time, EWR was envisaged as a standalone railway with an independent operator. Interviewees felt that this assumption of a stand-alone delivery company led to a significant delay in working with the future operator and increased bureaucracy, resulting in missed opportunities and impairing the ability of the railway to be embedded into local communities such as:

- Resolving integrated transport issues;

- Working jointly on the operational plans for Winslow Station car park to meet both local needs and support adoption of the new passenger services e.g. who would operate it; and this linked to wider aspirations for active travel and modal shift;
- Credibility of depot plans;
- Avoiding duplication of expertise that already exists within train operators and Network Rail.

Services to Cambridge are now expected by 2037. Universal United Kingdom Resort further adds to the strategic importance of East West Rail. There is currently no commitment from Government to deliver the Aylesbury link, though work on advocating for it – including as part of a wider Northampton-Old Oak Common rail corridor – continues.

Learnings and Lessons

Working together to mitigate construction impact

Heavy construction traffic placed a strain onto rural and residential roads, leading to damage of local roads such as potholes, surface cracking and accelerated wear. It was noted that the costs of repair fell to local authorities where the conditions or surveys were absent or vague, which was a source of tension leading to a breakdown of trust. Negotiating with specificity protected councils, particularly when budgets got tighter.

It is noted that each authority and stakeholder group handled public interaction slightly differently. As councils negotiated separately on binding planning conditions (such as road condition surveys and repair funds), there were differences in outcomes between different places.

1. **Apply joint responsibility, and swiftly acknowledge and resolve issues, to maintain community trust.**

Speed of acknowledgement and response to issues was critical to building trust and minimising resistance to future road closures. Local authorities may find it helpful to gain assurances that contractors have response teams and to sign-off on published rectification standards and timelines. In addition, consideration could be given to agreeing traffic loading thresholds that trigger interim repairs.

It is helpful to carry out full independent pre-works road condition surveys, which are signed off and communicated before construction begins, supplemented with mid-construction checkpoints and independent post-condition surveys as part of highways hand back.

Where councils negotiated for a specific ‘pothole fund’ or a contribution to local maintenance, these were often found to be inadequate compared to the level of damage. More success was found where councils identified and agreed strategic roads/route in advance and upgraded poor roads in ahead of construction starting. Where possible, road upgrades and repairs can be framed as a visible benefit of the works.

2. **It is helpful to have a single point of contact or liaison officer for each organisation, and to bring them together to undertake joint planning.**

Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) work through ensuring clear contacts resulting in clear communications between the local authority and the scheme deliverer. On cross-authority projects, dedicated SPOC forums (with appropriate functional support as needed) help to share insight, and build alignment. Having these trusted relationships aided in achieving handover more smoothly, as well as allowing for a clear escalation ladder of issues and time-boxed dispute resolution.

At times, the communication channels were not maintained across the different levels of government, including parish councils. Where possible, it is good to involve national and local influencers, parish councils and future operators in open, transparent dialogue. To support with giving clear messages to local communities, it is helpful to have a joint forum of SPOCs and/or liaison officers with a shared forward plan of all major

programmes of work in the area. Long-term clarity is as important as short-term delivery.

Where planning sessions were regularly attended by the right combination of people, they were effective in mitigating issues that arose between the demands of delivering major infrastructure and the impact on local communities. Joint Planning Ahead Groups should form part of the agreements between local authorities and major infrastructure projects to ensure these forums are set-up, adequately resourced and maintained.

3. **There is a need for consistent monitoring and communication around agreed traffic management mitigations e.g. of HGV movements to/from sites.**

Like most large infrastructure projects, EWR inevitably caused disruption to the local communities, with complaints raised around dust, noise and congestion resulting from construction traffic. However, in some places, there was a lack of clear routing agreements especially for leaving sites and these were not monitored by the EWR Alliance – this resulted in some vehicles utilising unsuitable minor roads passing through villages. Local authorities could consider putting in place robust systems for monitoring HGV movements to and from sites, with dashboard signage and channels to report poor behaviours.

Various complaints stemmed from a lack of clear, upfront communication about traffic management plans, particularly where residents and/or parish councils felt blindsided by sudden disruption. There is a need to ensure consistent, cross-party communication through forums, social media and public notices to avoid gaps in ownership.

4. **Cumulative impacts must be properly assessed and managed**

Coordination of the construction phase is particularly critical where there are multiple major infrastructure schemes ongoing in close proximity. For example, both HS2 and EWR are carrying out construction works in Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. The cumulative impact on residents is therefore far greater, and has led to local sensitivities stemming from traffic disruption, noise and impact on road conditions.

Additional construction projects within the same locality (planned, in progress or recently delivered) can lead communities to feeling 'under siege' and wary of further development. For these communities, it is even more essential that there is compelling evidence for the decision which has been made; a robust plan to manage cumulative impacts; a need to engage openly and with sensitivity; and to demonstrate benefits from infrastructure as soon as possible. Especially where there is no or little benefit to the community, this can be a "hard sell" for local authority representatives.

5. **Set up collaborative good practice with construction partners.**

Where local authorities are working in similar ways, there is an opportunity to agree an 'appropriate voice' in key processes, in line with collaborative process good practice (ISO44001 or equivalent). These can be made back-to-back with the construction partner to ensure a contractual link with the Local Highway Authority. This could include:

- The change management process – where a decision has the potential to impact was consented through the planning process;
- Derogations from standards;

- Roles and responsibilities clearly articulated (especially for Road Safety Audit process);
- Hand back submission and sign-off process, setting clear requirements for the contractor to follow, including non-conformance reporting and actioning;
- Road condition – how it is robustly validated, roads to be improved prior to use, pothole repairs, who will undertake inspections and who will undertake the repairs (agree proactively, not done retrospectively);
- Forward planning of all works in an area (such as through a Planning Ahead Working Group);
- Operational risk assessment.

Role of local authorities

Interviewees stressed the importance of local authorities playing a critical governance role in locally-derived programmes. At the outset, governance of EWR was shaped by the consortium of local authorities who backed the scheme. Mechanisms like Work in Kind (WiK) contributions and the Transport and Works Act Order (TWAO) ensured that the EWR Alliance recognised the locally-derived nature of the project and the risk of opposition if it failed to take account of local knowledge. While the establishment of the East West Railway Company has helped drive forward the project (and demonstrated the seriousness of Government's commitment to deliver it) it did, according to some interviewees, mean the influence of the Consortium and local authorities over the future of the scheme decreased, particularly as CS2 and CS3 were developed.

The balance of influence is different under a TWAO (as used for Oxford – Milton Keynes) compared to Development Consent Order (DCO) regime (required for construction to Cambridge). Under the TWAO, it is local authorities which discharge planning conditions e.g. around minimising disruption during the construction process. Under the DCO this leverage is reduced, resulting in a risk of local authorities being treated as consultees rather than as consenting bodies.

6. **Local authorities should have a defined role within major infrastructure scheme governance which recognises their role in delivering place-based benefits to maximise the socio-economic impact.**

From design and change control to handover and enduring benefits, governance must cover the lifecycle of the programme. Where local authorities promote an infrastructure project as an enabler of socio-economic benefits (such as EWR) maintaining an appropriate level of influence is fundamental to protecting those benefits and ensuring continued community buy-in.

Processes should be put in place to escalate issues, track non-conformances and guarantee reporting on socio-economic outcomes long after construction ends.

Governance structures must ensure transparent appraisal of options, with decisions logged against agreed socio-economic benefits. Decisions that are seen as 'broken promises' undermine future collaboration. For example, the decision to descope the Aylesbury link can be seen in this light. As well as contributing via the Work in Kind mechanism, Buckinghamshire Council committed to extra housing on the fair expectation that a spur between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes would be constructed as part of EWR. The fall-out from this decision continues to erode trust today.

Local authorities could seek commitments to a benefits-linked change control process, where changes to the scope or timetable of the project are declared in terms of the balance between local benefits and national benefits. Benefits-based control makes the trade-offs explicit and legitimates them, with a public log of decisions and rationales (e.g. options, costs, benefits). This could be agreed as part of a benefits-weighted assurance plan (i.e. more local reporting where more local value is promised).

Local authorities should seek to have an appropriate voice in the performance assurance of a major infrastructure scheme, where it pertains to delivering local benefits. This should include collaborative governance around change management processes where local communities are likely to be impacted by the change and the benefits of the place-based plan would not be delivered as a result.

It can be helpful to have a shared dashboard with two-way access and quarterly reviews as part of a shared assurance approach. The KPIs chosen could be balanced across safety, quality, schedule, through-life cost and socio-economic outcomes, with incentives that do not privilege capex minimisation over whole-life value.

7. **Avoid ambiguity: Binding consent conditions and local requirements embedded within the DCO are crucial for safeguarding local benefits and ensuring local authorities have the appropriate leverage to control the impacts on their communities.**

"Unless you have leverage, you will inherit decisions, that you will need to live with"

As projects mature and come under cost pressures, legally enforceable planning and consent conditions (e.g. covering roads, stations and wider connectivity) are essential to protect communities and maintain trust. Ambiguous conditions under a TWAO or a DCO risk being unenforceable unless they are grounded in real actions. Planning conditions need to be translated into clear, funded responsibilities, with advance payments and written commitments that tie delivery (e.g. new stations) to measurable growth outcomes. Utilising the DCO process to lock in local requirements early provides a coordinated way to protect impacted local communities.

Shaping the DCO as part of the planning stages for Connection Stage 2 and Connection Stage 3 presents an opportunity to maximise the socio-economic gains that EWR is being built to deliver through negotiation of appropriate requirements, protective provisions and planning performance conditions.

8. **Local contributions to EWR, in the form of Work in Kind agreements, framed local authorities as partners in the scheme.**

"Some developers consider that all we do is discharge planning conditions. We are actually partners jointly delivering the socio-economic benefits for the local community"

Rather than upfront monetary payment, the Work in Kind (WiK) agreement allowed local authorities to contribute through officer time, consultancy resource, land and place-based commitments. This approach protected some of the capability and capacity required in planning teams (particularly through times of austerity) to enable closer collaboration with the EWR Alliance than in traditional infrastructure projects. It was felt by interviewees that this moved conversations away from discharging planning conditions, to give local authorities real influence as partners in the scheme helping to

shape the initial vision. It also helped remove the potential conflict which arises when major projects pay directly for officer time used to provide consent to the project.

Power of region speaking with one voice

By aligning the message and speaking with one voice, the region was able to amplify, influence and shape the East West Rail project. This was especially true in the project's earlier days, i.e. when the assumption was that the 'Western Section' from Oxford to Bedford, and including the Aylesbury link, was being delivered. Cross-authority alignment provided not only clarity and confidence, with the approach also recognising local authorities as promoters and partners of the scheme. Unlike other national infrastructure projects where it was felt that councils are limited to being "consent-givers", local authorities felt part of ensuring the project delivered socio-economic benefits along the EWR corridor.

9. **Forming a collective, consistent voice strengthens the positions of local authorities in negotiations and in managing handover from the project.**

"It was important that there was one voice for EWR. Consistency was paramount – it built trust"

For cross-authority major infrastructure schemes, a one-voice approach can strengthen and consolidate the collective voice of local authorities in their negotiations – either by agreeing common planning conditions (under a Transport and Works Act Order - TWAO) or common requirements/protective provisions under a Development Consent Order (DCO). Agreeing a consistent approach and standard processes for managing the handover process across all local authorities with the project team can give additional protection from disruption on roads, as well as ensuring the project delivers for the local community.

Ensuring continued focus on places

It has always been acknowledged that EWR is an enabler of local, regional and national economic growth. Over time, the narrative around EWR has evolved from a locally-driven scheme to a national economic project, for example, as typified in the National Infrastructure Commission's 2016 report into the value of East West Rail to the 'Oxford-Cambridge Arc'. This has benefitted the scheme in terms of raising its profile, maximising its value and ensuring continued Government support, however, it is important that place-based needs remain a key consideration.

10. **It is critical to understand what the core requirements of a scheme are to successfully balance the tension between local needs across multiple local authorities, strategic rail needs, and the Government's wider priorities.**

Solutions to balance inherent tensions should focus on what is core whilst flexing everything else. During delivery, the perseverance of officers and members to not compromise on what was 'core' protected local communities and supported delivery of local benefits. Decisions that override local advocacy risk undermining years of trust-building, with long-term consequences.

Each political cycle risks reframing the objectives of the scheme, which leaves local authorities uncertain about the project's direction. Where there were long period of silence, this created vacuums, fuelling frustration and doubts about whether the project

would proceed. Without a clear, consistent articulation of benefits, debates risk being dominated by contentious issues, such as level crossing closures, station location and disruption on local roads.

11. **Aligning social value fund deployment with local plans can maximise their impact.**

Social value funds from the EWR Alliance were deployed piecemeal. Had they been aligned with Local Plans, this would have maximised their impact. A place-based approach could provide clear guidance to EWRCo and other developers on how their social value contributions on CS2 and CS3 can be best utilised.

12. **To enable effective integration of EWR, the future operator for CS2 and CS3 needs to be involved early.**

The delays in understanding the role Network Rail would play as the delivery body and future asset owner, as well as the link to the operator, led to late engagement with key delivery bodies. This is difficult to compensate for later in the programme. The delayed engagement with the operator on Connection Stage 1 (CS1) has impacted the integration and adoption of EWR within the local community.

There is a need for clarity on who the key influencers of schemes are, with sponsor-level relationships being built early. The impact of key influencers not being fully bought-in or engaged at the early stages can result in unnecessary blockers later on in the project's lifecycle.

Local Authorities could advocate for inclusion of a requirement embedded within the DCO to ensure early involvement of the future operator.

Communications

Because EWR is a locally-derived scheme, this brought with it high expectations around meaningful engagement and greater collaboration than on other infrastructure projects. The use of single points of contact (SPOCs) for each local authority was particularly praised to ensure clarity of communications and the use of dedicated SPOC forums help to share insights and build alignment between local authorities and the EWR Alliance. Success hinged on the right forums with the right people in the room, and faltered when this was lacking.

13. **The most powerful narratives about EWR were those that focused on place-based benefits (growth, jobs and housing) – not just on rail journeys.**

"The Green Book knows the cost of everything, and the value of nothing"

A common message constantly repeated, across local authorities, grounded in the needs of communities, will continue to be essential during the development and construction of the line from Milton Keynes to Cambridge.

Local authorities play an important role in building on local support for EWR with consistent messaging focused on place-based tangible benefits and sustaining feedback loops across local authorities, parishes and communities. These feedback loops provided valuable insight to EWR Alliance, EWRCo and to DfT, as well as ensuring that long-term

place-based benefits remained high on the agenda through quieter periods of project (where descoping is more of a risk).

14. **Open communication has a role to play in helping communities have a balanced understanding of a scheme.**

"This was a locally derived scheme – people want their say – it is their scheme"

A project rooted in community need must involve the community throughout. As well as helping communities to have a balanced understanding, communication is key in preparing them for long-term impacts, such as passing loops or electrification, in an open and honest manner. It is critical that communications include accurate information about the potential impact of the operations of major infrastructure, recognising that communities will live with those long after the project teams have left.

Scheme promoters should manage expectations by being frank and honest about the project and the disruption which will be caused from the outset. Future scaling back of assurances will cause long-term damage to trust and support.

Local politicians have significant experience in handling sensitive information. They can be trusted to respect confidences and commercial sensitivities. Engaging early with them as trusted partners and utilising their local knowledge can often identify challenges and minimise their impacts.

Building collaboration, capability and capacity

Having the right people with the right expertise and with the right relationships was critical to delivery. Staff moving between local authorities benefited delivery as they brought with them experience, expertise and already formed relationships with key parties.

15. **Consider a planned, collaborative and coordinated approach to sharing capability and capacity – whilst also recognising the need to safeguard local accountability**

There is a need for balancing in-house expertise and outsourced support to safeguard local accountability. Consent-giving, enforcement of planning conditions and safety-critical oversight (e.g. level crossing road barriers) require dedicated officers with the capacity and commercial focus to protect local interests.

Lessons were learned between the local authorities from the continuity of people moving between councils, for example from knowledge of planning processes and consent negotiations. These serendipitous staff moves helped share expertise and knowledge between local authorities in CS1.

Where there was higher turnover in people (on all sides), this resulted in more formality and delays whilst trust was being re-built between organisations. A more coordinated approach to sharing resources and expertise across local authorities might support building the longer-term relationships needed. This could be supported by established knowledge sharing groups.

The use of trusted credible individuals can carry the weight of building the "load-bearing" relationship across multiple layers of government, to ensure that local authorities

maintain a voice on locally-derived projects. In addition, cross-departmental advocates are as critical as formal governance in moving a project into national policy.

16. **Apply technical expertise and local understanding to shape decisions together.**

"People do not always understand how a railway works. Similarly, the rail industry and consultants do not always understand how the places and people affected by strategic rail infrastructure proposals."

There was a mutual learning challenge: local authorities did not always have a deep understanding of how railways operate (e.g. around timetable access agreements, freight, safety-critical infrastructure such as level crossing barrier systems), while the railway sector needs to improve its understanding of how local authorities enable housing, jobs and door-to-door connectivity. Whilst the railway professionals understood how to deliver and operate a safe, efficient network, it is local authorities that understand the places that network affects.

Local insight was not always embedded into the decision-making process, increasing delays and additional costs to the project. The best outcomes come when local authorities and the project team apply their expertise to shape decisions together. For example, decisions around new stations and passive provisions require both technical insight and clear growth-linked triggers. Bridging this gap is as important as technical capability.

Local authorities will engage with a major project at many levels in representing their communities – this includes both officer and elected representative (local politicians). Both groups are experienced in dealing with sensitivities, for example around planning, and major infrastructure schemes will benefit from very early, open meaningful engagement and collaborative working to gain insights from both.

Afterword

Meaningful engagement with local communities (including local authorities) needs to be placed at the heart of delivery of major infrastructure schemes, throughout the planning and construction stages.

At the time of undertaking the interviews for this report, our hope was that there would be a celebration of passenger services running between Oxford and Milton Keynes in late 2025 – a hope that multiple local authorities have shared for over 30 years.

As yet, this has not come to fruition – a disappointment to all those involved in or impacted by the project. The delay is eroding the trust of local communities in proximity to the line. Many residents were seriously impacted by East West Rail's construction and, as of today, the only services they currently see on it are for freight.

East West Rail represents a step-change in connectivity for people living and working in the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor. As well as being nationally significant, it is regionally pivotal to realising transport integration, and locally meaningful as people make life-changing decisions as a result of commitments made.

It is critical, therefore, that lessons are learned and embedded in the practices of future planning and construction stages of the East West Rail scheme.

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